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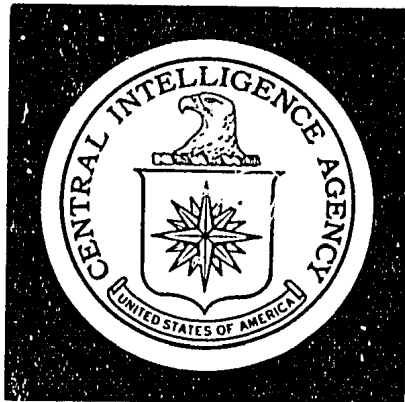
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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Memorandum

SOUTH VIETNAM'S SENATE ELECTIONS

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30 July 1970  
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
30 July 1970

## INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

South Vietnam's Senate ElectionsSummary

The government is likely to do fairly well in the coming Senate elections. President Thieu has indicated that he will try to secure the election of senators favorable to his regime, and these candidates should have a good chance of winning. Thieu's past relations with the legislature have occasionally been stormy, and the President would like to see progovernment candidates elected in order to smooth the road for the government's legislative program and also to deny a forum to his political opponents.

A victory for favored candidates would have only a limited effect on the regime's over-all political strength. If the government should lose the elections, on the other hand, political instability could worsen. Some of Thieu's major political opponents see the Senate elections as a prelude to the 1971 presidential election, and a defeat for the President would encourage their preparations for the more important contest next year.

*Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates and the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs.*

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Significance

1. The elections on 30 August for 30 of the 60 Senate seats will mark the first contest for national office in South Vietnam since 1967. Virtually all of the country's major political figures are either directly or indirectly involved in the elections, and many see them as a prelude to next year's presidential election. Candidates for the Senate are spread across the non-Communist political spectrum, from staunch supporters of the government to outspoken opponents of President Thieu.
2. Although a victory for government-backed candidates in the elections would assist President Thieu in securing passage of his legislative program, the gain in terms of political stability would be limited. The government's dependence on the South Vietnamese Army and on the backing of the US Government as its main base of support would not be altered by the results. Moreover, a victory at the polls would be less an indication of popular support for President Thieu than evidence that the government's administrative apparatus had functioned efficiently in promoting progovernment candidates and getting out the vote.
3. The elections are unlikely to produce much more unity among the country's factionalized political forces. Since the Paris talks began in 1968, there has been extensive discussion of the need for nationalist unity to prepare for political competition with the Communists, but all attempts to form fronts or coalitions among the various political groups have foundered, largely because of personal rivalries among their leaders. Under pressure of the election campaign, some politicians are again talking about joining forces. It appears doubtful, however, that even a complete victory for progovernment forces would lead to the formation of any new fronts that would last longer or be any more effective than their predecessors.
4. The outcome of the elections will be more meaningful if government-backed candidates should suffer a clear-cut defeat. President Thieu's major

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potential rivals in the 1971 presidential election-- Vice President Ky, Big Minh, and Senator Don--will be watching the senatorial contest from the sidelines and hoping for a slip by the President. A defeat for government-supported candidates would result in a loss of face for Thieu, putting the government on the defensive and encouraging the opposition to make a real run against him for the presidency next year.

5. A victory by the opposition could more directly lead to increased political instability if it used its voting powers to defeat high-priority government legislation. In such a situation, Thieu might be tempted to resort to extraconstitutional methods, as he has in the past. Army support for the present political structure probably would also decline.

6. For their part, the Communists would welcome a setback for Thieu, and would exploit it in their propaganda as evidence that Thieu lacks support and should be removed. They would also hope to benefit from any subsequent instability that might result. There is no evidence, however, to indicate that they exercise any influence over opposition candidates. Although in past South Vietnamese elections, there have been numerous reports that Communists planned to disrupt the voting through military action, they have usually only harassed the polling on a relatively small scale. The Communists, who do not appear to be greatly concerned by such elections, probably will continue their past practice and refrain from any major effort to disrupt the contests.

7. Regardless of the result, the elections serve as an outlet for opponents of the government, who are working for change within the constitutional system. Large segments of the non-Communist opposition, including the militant An Quang Buddhists, are supporting their own candidates. Without elections, some of Thieu's opponents would probably spend more time scheming to overthrow his regime.

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8. The manner in which the elections are conducted will significantly affect the government's standing at home and abroad. Many politically aware Vietnamese, including losing candidates, are likely to feel that they have a stake in the system provided they believe that the elections are honestly administered. On the other hand, widespread reports of ballot-box stuffing and other abuses would provide ammunition for domestic and foreign critics in their continuing campaign to discredit the government, and attacks on the government regarding major problems such as high prices, corruption, and the war itself would probably increase.

#### The Electoral Process at Work

9. Because elections are a recent import from the West, Vietnamese voters are still relatively inexperienced in choosing representatives, and, except for a fairly small educated elite, they probably do not understand the process. Nevertheless, in recent years South Vietnam has held a series of elections for local and national offices, and the most recent one, held earlier this year, induced more campaign activity and greater interest than those in the past.

10. In the Senate elections, candidates must run on ten-man slates rather than as individuals, and they will be chosen by the country at large rather than by separate constituencies. Voters will choose three slates from the 17 nominated, and candidates belonging to the three lists getting the most votes will win seats. A number of lists have included candidates from many major voting groups, in order to broaden their appeal. The slates function mainly as loose electoral coalitions, however, and winning candidates will not necessarily work together after the Senate resumes. There have been many realignments of voting blocs since the last senatorial elections in 1967, and most of the lists elected at that time did not remain intact for long.

11. Senators serve six-year terms, with one half of the Senate up for election every three years.

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When the Senate was first elected under the new constitution in 1967, all 60 seats had to be filled. Therefore, members of the Senate drew lots last December to determine the 30 seats which would be contested again this year and which senators would serve out their full terms until 1973.

#### The Government

12. President Thieu's relations with the legislature have been stormy on a number of occasions during the past three years. Although the President has usually been able to secure passage of legislation that he has sought, this has sometimes been attained only after he had expended considerable time and energy. Moreover, Thieu has been unable to form a solid progovernment majority bloc in the National Assembly.

13. As a military man and as an Asian leader steeped in an authoritarian tradition, Thieu clearly has been embarrassed by the Assembly's challenge to his leadership. The resulting loss of face tends to weaken support for the government in general. Moreover, Thieu clearly dislikes having the Assembly used as a forum by some of his major opponents. He undoubtedly regards it as a personal victory that his most prominent legislative opponent--Senator Don--has decided not to campaign for another term. On learning about the list backed by the An Quang Buddhists, Thieu immediately indicated concern that it could cause him further difficulties in his relations with the Assembly.

14. Thieu clearly intends to influence the election to get a body more responsive to his leadership. He has indicated that he will back two strong slates headed by incumbent Catholic Senators Huyen and Cao, and that he will probably also support a third less prestigious list headed by Catholic Nhan Xa party leader Truong Vinh Le. Although the slates include representatives of other groups, the positioning of these three Catholic politicians at the head of their respective lists emphasizes the importance of the Catholic hierarchy in Thieu's political

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support. Although the Catholics constitute a relatively small minority of the total population in South Vietnam, they have demonstrated good voting discipline and did well in the 1967 senatorial elections. This year, however, there are two other lists headed by prominent Catholics, in addition to the three that Thieu will probably support--a factor that could disperse the Catholic vote.

15. There are also a number of other lists sympathetic to the government that could draw support away from the preferred slates. The President's long-stagnant political front, the National Social Democratic Front, could not agree on a joint Senate list--a development that may herald its ultimate demise. Several of the front's member parties have entered competing slates of their own.

16. Although it is not clear how directly Thieu intends to participate in the campaign, he can be expected to get word to the government bureaucracy on the slates he prefers. In past elections, there have been allegations of ballot box manipulation by government officials, and some observers have already expressed fears that the regime will resort to such tactics in the Senate elections.

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It may prove difficult for election officials to stuff ballot boxes, however, in the many locations where opposition candidates will have observers stationed.

17. There is much the government can do to influence the outcome of the contests short of out-and-out fraud. Leaders of the South Vietnamese military forces will make sure their troops vote, and they may contribute substantial electoral support to government-backed slates. Government officials in the provinces--particularly district chiefs--have played a key role in past elections and will probably do so again. These officials can suggest to local village leaders, often subtly, which candidates they should get their people to

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vote for--if the villages want government funds or favors. Moreover, despite provisions for a secret ballot, many voters probably will be reluctant to go against the known wishes of local authorities.

18. In recent elections the uneducated masses, especially, have often voted mainly out of fear that failure to do so would incur the displeasure of the local authorities. This apparently has often led to selections being made on the basis of a symbol or the number assigned to a particular slate. Also, in many cases, the people have voted for candidates who they learn--either directly or indirectly--are preferred by local officials, religious or political party leaders whom the voters respect or fear. Many unknowledgeable voters will cast their votes at random, and a large portion of the total national vote will tend to cancel itself out. Because of these factors a disciplined group numbering only a few hundred thousand could represent the margin of victory for the winners.

#### The Opposition

19. The decision by Senator Don not to run for re-election has removed President Thieu's most prominent active opponent from the contest. There were indications that Thieu would make a major effort to defeat Don, and the senator, certainly aware of this, apparently doubted that he could win. Don has publicly indicated that he still intends to remain active in the political opposition, but he may find his influence somewhat diminished without the Upper House chamber available as his sounding board.

20. With Don out of the race, the An Quang Buddhist-backed slate headed by Vu Van Mau appears to be the leading opposition contender. This slate includes several relatively moderate An Quang supporters, as well as incumbent Senator Dinh, a colleague of Don's. Mau's chances may depend on how well An Quang can mobilize its followers to vote for his list. The militant Buddhists have a large following, particularly in the northern provinces, but they have been weakened by factional disputes,

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and it is not clear whether they will unite behind the electoral effort. The Buddhists are not as well organized or as well disciplined politically as the smaller Catholic population.

21. The opposition forces, like the government side, have attractive candidates spread thinly among a number of slates. Three staunchly oppositionist slates could draw support away from the Mau list, although they appear to have little chance of winning election themselves. In addition, the moderate oppositionist Progressive Nationalist Movement has fielded a list of its own. This party, which supports the government on many issues, will be aided by strong organization in some areas of the country, but its list suffers from a lack of prestigious political figures.

22. Except in the northern provinces, which have a long history of political party activity, parties are generally not very active or well organized in most areas. The personal prestige of the candidate is usually much more important to the South Vietnamese voter than party affiliation or positions on the issues. To the extent that issues do make a difference, opposition candidates may be able to profit from widespread dissatisfaction over the government's economic policies. Rapidly rising prices have been the most serious problem for the government other than the war itself. Some contenders may try to exploit war weariness by calling for new steps to bring an early end to the conflict, and some may charge the government with poor handling of agitation by students and veterans. The formal election campaign is limited to the two weeks prior to the balloting, and the purely national issues will probably have an impact on only a relatively small number of voters.

### Prospects

23. The government seems likely to do fairly well in the elections. The slate headed by Senator Huyen and backed by the government appears to have the best chance of winning. The widely respected

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Huyen has former prime minister Huong, as one of his running mates, and together they are the most prestigious candidates from the populous southern region of the country. The other two slates that apparently will have Thieu's support--those headed by Senator Cao and by Truong Vinh Le--also rate a good chance. All these slates have broadened their appeal beyond the Catholic population by including representatives of groups such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, the ethnic Cambodian minority, and the Montagnards.

24. If two of the three winning lists are favorable to President Thieu, it would represent a net gain for progovernment forces in the Upper House. The Mau slate, with its An Quang Buddhist support, must be rated a strong contender, but none of the other clearly antigovernment lists seems to have more than an outside chance of winning.

25. There are a number of relatively strong lists not firmly in either the government or the opposition camps that may have a chance of winning. Because of this, the election results may be neither a clear-cut victory nor a defeat for the government. Moreover, some of the candidates on the lists Thieu intends to back, such as Senator Huyen and former prime minister Huong, are independent-minded men not likely to be controlled by the government. For this reason, even if the progovernment slates win, it will not be until the new Senate begins to act on high-priority government legislation that it will become clear how much Thieu has gained from the elections.

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